

Women marching on!

Milestones in CAOPA's march for the rights of women in African artisanal fisheries

By **Beatrice Gorez**
(cffa.cape@gmail.com),
Coordinator, Coalition
for Fair Fisheries
Arrangements (CFFA),
Brussels, Belgium

On 19 March 2010, in Banjul, The Gambia, men and women professionals from the artisanal fishing sector from nine West African countries presided over the formation and launch of the African Confederation of Artisanal Fishing Organisations: CAOPA.

Ten years later, CAOPA has become an advocacy platform for African artisanal fishing community rights, entering into dialogue with African decision makers, as well as with international partners, like the EU and the FAO. CAOPA is now also stronger: it has member organisations in 24 countries from West, East, and North Africa and from the Indian Ocean. Every 21st November, CAOPA uses the occasion of the World Fisheries Day to establish its advocacy agenda for the year to come.

Since the outset, CAOPA has called for the recognition, respect and promotion of the role of women in African artisanal fisheries. However, in the first couple of years of existence, their advocacy was mainly geared towards fishermen's concerns for securing better access to fishing grounds.

The turning point came in March 2014, when the organisation celebrated the first International Women Day in Abidjan/Grand Bassam, Ivory Coast. This was an occasion for women from 16 African countries to come together and to highlight their diverse and multi-faceted roles in the artisanal fisheries sector. While women are particularly active in fish processing and marketing, they are present all along the artisanal fisheries value chain, both in pre- and post-harvest activities, and as owners of vessels and fishing equipment. They pre-finance the fishing trips, paying for the fuel and food for the crew, sorting out landed fish, processing and marketing it, dealing with the bank and the administration, caring for their family and putting food on the table. Women also play an important role in conflict resolution in the community, and in awareness-raising on a variety of issues, including sea safety. Often their menfolk require persuading to wear a life jacket when going fishing, which they often dismiss as unmanly. "Without the presence of women in fisheries, there will be no sustainable fisheries," highlighted Micheline Dion Somplehi, President of the Women Fish Processors' Cooperatives in Ivory Coast, at the conclusion of this first women's meeting.

This message, since then constantly emphasised in CAOPA gatherings, has led

gradually to the recognition of and respect for women by their men colleagues as bona fide stakeholders in all aspects of the fisheries, from the management of fish resources to the financing of the fishing operations, to processing and trading. This recognition has also been incorporated into the structure of the organisation. The CAOPA board is now constituted on the basis of gender parity, with 4 men and 4 women.

Since 2014, women from CAOPA member organisations gathered yearly on the International Women's Day, in different African countries: Guinea Bissau, Mauritania, Uganda, The Gambia, and Guinea. In all of these countries, the organisation of this international event provided an opportunity to give visibility to the local women's organisations, to raise awareness with the public about their role in the local fishing sector, and to make local decision makers listen to their concerns. The result has been the creation, or the reinforcement, of a dialogue between national governments and the women's organisations.

The CAOPA celebration of the International Women's Day also influenced the direction the organisation's advocacy took. It provided an opportunity for women to discuss their own priorities, and the process has helped them to come together with a united voice when the advocacy agenda is discussed in November amongst all CAOPA members, during World Fisheries Day celebrations.

An example of this influence can be seen in the process that led CAOPA to champion the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines) in Africa. During the 2017 International Women's Day meeting in Uganda, participants called on African States, in preparation for the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture in 2022, "to develop, in a participatory, transparent and gender-sensitive manner, a national, and where appropriate regional, Plan of Action for the implementation of the FAO Guidelines on sustainable small scale fisheries".

This recommendation was taken up by CAOPA, who made it its central advocacy priority, expressed both during the Our Ocean Conference in Malta at the end of 2017, and during the 34th Session of COFI in 2018. In collaboration with local women's and men's



International women day marching in Guinea Bissau on 8 March 2015. The increasing involvement of women in the defining of CAOPA advocacy priorities and in its actions has contributed to show that artisanal fishing communities, particularly women, are innovators and active stakeholders.

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organisations, CAOPA initiated a dialogue with the governments of Ivory Coast, Guinea and Senegal to develop such national action plans. The first result has been the elaboration, with women's participation, of Senegal's National Action Plan for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, scheduled to be launched beginning of March but postponed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

With this initiative, Senegal recognises the central role of the local artisanal sector to fight poverty and to promote food security, and the importance to ensure its sustainability. However, in the meantime, Senegal continues to allow a dozen fishmeal factories to operate. These fishmeal factories are directly competing with the Senegalese women fish processors for access to small pelagic fish as raw material. This high demand for small pelagics also aggravates the fishing pressure on these already over-exploited resources. Artisanal fishers are amongst those who supply small pelagics to these fishmeal plants, either because they get a better price than they do when they sell to the women, or because they have entered into an unfair long-term contract with the plant. Under such contracts they are only paid at the end of several months, which means they must constantly fish for these plants if they want to be paid. This situation creates tensions between women fish processors and fishers, and even between those fishers who fish for the fishmeal plants, and those who fish for the local markets.

Women fish processors have been at the forefront of the campaign in Senegal calling for the closure of the fishmeal plants, asking their government "to commit resolutely to the sustainable and transparent management of the

fisheries resources and to give priority access to those who contribute to the food and nutritional security of the population" – something Senegal committed to, in theory, through its SSF Guidelines National Action Plan. This lack of policy coherence is detrimental to the interests of women in fisheries, and to food security. It calls for a better alignment of all Senegal policies that affect women in fisheries with the National Action Plan to implement the SSF Guidelines.

In 2017, the CAOPA celebration of the International Women's Day in The Gambia focussed on 'The role of women in promoting environmentally and socially sustainable fishing practices'. A focus of the discussion was illegal fishing, by both the industrial and artisanal sectors, and the lack of political will, and means, of governments to address the issue. Women from countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, The Gambia, Mali and Nigeria all agreed that illegal fishing and poor resource management was adversely impacting their activities. What was interesting was that, rather than only pleading for their governments to take action, they also took things in their own hands, and pledged not to process any more juvenile fish, illegally caught by artisanal fishers.

These examples reveal how the increasing involvement of women in defining of CAOPA advocacy priorities and in its actions has contributed to show that artisanal fishing communities, particularly women, are innovators and active stakeholders in the decision making process. ■